

## Success For Low-Skill Adult Students

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Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

[http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/docs/education/ford\\_bridges/bldg\\_pathways\\_to\\_success\\_for\\_low-skilled\\_adult\\_stdts-brief.pdf](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/docs/education/ford_bridges/bldg_pathways_to_success_for_low-skilled_adult_stdts-brief.pdf),

A commuter transit system that is run on the schedule of working adults and that can accommodate on-and-off traffic, but still makes connections to long-term destinations, may be an apt metaphor for an education system effective in serving low-skill adults. Such a system would provide a clear map of the educational pathways that students could follow to advance in their jobs and pursue further education, indicating where they can “stop out” of education for a time and reenter, as they are able. The system would give students a lot of guidance and support so they do not get lost as they leave and reenter college, and would allow adults to go farther and faster than they do in the conventional college system.

The findings indicate that community and technical colleges should consider making at least one year of college-level courses and earning a credential a minimum goal for the many low-skill adults they serve. While hundreds of low-skill adult students in the sample were able to achieve this threshold level of attainment in five years, many more did not. Eight out of ten students in adult basic education, ABE or English as a second language, ESL, were able to make modest skill gains, at best earning a GED, but did not advance to college-level courses.

Short-term training, such as the type often provided to welfare recipients seeking to enter the workforce, may help individuals get into the labor market, but it usually does not help them advance beyond low-paying jobs. Neither does an adult basic skills education by itself nor a limited number of college-level courses provide much benefit in terms of either employment or earnings. Another recent study of Washington State community college students found that adult basic skills programs had no impact on wages and had only a modest impact on average rates of employment in the long term (but not the short term).

This study found that seven out of ten students who had a GED and took college-credit courses left with less (and often a lot less) than a year of college credit and no credential. This is also true for the more than two out of three students who had a high school diploma and took college courses.

To enable low-skill adults to achieve the threshold need of one year of college plus a credential or more, community colleges in Washington State and elsewhere should rethink their programs and services.

For example, the study found that there are students—the 69 percent of ABE and ESL students who make the transition to college-level work with a high school diploma or GED in hand who are eligible to receive financial aid and developmental education. These supports would make it two to three times more likely that they would earn a credential, but, at best, only one-third of these students receive them. Therefore, it would be useful for basic skills and developmental education faculty to work together to encourage students to take advantage of developmental courses and to work with

counseling and student services staff to ensure that eligible students apply for financial aid.

In addition, support should be given to the far larger group of students who have or earn a high school diploma or GED but never go beyond basic skills in community college. More aggressive efforts to educate them about their college education opportunities, combined with “bridge programs” that ease their transition to college, might increase their enrollment and success in college-level programs.

Finally, since short-term training that is focused on getting low-skilled adults a job generally does not result in earnings gains over time when students do not continue their education, colleges could help students avoid dead-end starts by ensuring that short-term training options lead to real educational attainment in the long term.

The study’s data source was the system that the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges uses to track students in its 34 colleges. The database contains complete transcript information on every student who enrolls in college- credit or non-credit courses. Researchers used student record information from the Washington State Community and Technical College System to examine the educational experience and attainment as well as the employment and earnings of a sample of adult students, five years after first enrolling. The students in the sample were age 25 or older with, at most, a high school education.

The study sample consisted of two SBCTC cohorts: first-time college students who were adults age 25 or older with a high school education or less and who started in 1996-97 or in 1997-98. These younger students were included because by not graduating from high school and enrolling at a community college, they had in effect entered the adult labor market, whether or not they were employed.

The sample included students who enrolled in college-credit (including college remedial or “developmental”) or adult basic skills programs, which include adult basic education (ABE), English as a second language (ESL), and GED preparation. In Washington State, adult basic skills programs are provided through the community and technical colleges.

Together the two cohorts totaled 34,956 students, or about one-third of all students who entered a community or technical college for the first time in Washington State in the two baseline years.